

General Baptist ‘Primitivism’, the Radical Reformation, and Matthew Caffyn: A Response to Kegan A. Chandler

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<https://doi.org/10.25782/jeb.v21i1.701>

Abstract:

Kegan A. Chandler recently argued that the Anabaptist movement was in part defined by an acceptance of anti-Trinitarianism, which heritage became a part of General Baptist life from the beginning; on this basis he locates Matthew Caffyn as an authentic representative of the General Baptist movement. I argue that Chandler’s historical reconstruction of the Radical Reformation is flawed, being based on some errors of fact and some misreadings, and that most Anabaptists, and all early General Baptists, were unreflectively orthodox in their Trinitarianism. I suggest however that the case of Caffyn suggests both a willingness on the part of the denomination to regard orthopraxy as important alongside orthodoxy, and a degree of suspicion of non-biblical standards of orthodoxy.

Keywords:

Matthew Caffyn; Christology; Trinity; General Baptists.

Introduction

In 2019, this journal carried an article by Kegan A. Chandler, arguing for the rehabilitation of Matthew Caffyn (1628–1714) within General Baptist history, as an authentic representative of a native (General) Baptist tradition, rather than as an alien intrusion of some form of modernism.¹ He argued that we should view Caffyn ‘not [as] the agent of some non-Baptist philosophy, but [...] [as] a Reformer committed to that side of the General Baptist coin which had always reflected the Radical, not the Magisterial, approach to Christology and to religious freedom’.²

¹ Kegan A. Chandler, ‘Unorthodox Christology in General Baptist History: The Legacy of Matthew Caffyn’, *JES* 19, no. 2 (2019): 140–151.

² Chandler, ‘Unorthodox Christology’, p. 151.

I have considerable sympathy with Chandler's desire to locate Caffyn within a Baptist tradition; and also with his insistence that the right lens through which to read Caffyn is absolutely not 'eighteenth-century rationalism'; that said, his paper makes a number of errors of historical fact and interpretation, leading to conclusions that are in danger of distorting the tradition he is trying to locate Caffyn within. In dialogue with Chandler, I want to offer here a different sketch of what it is to be Baptist, one that is more historically informed, but which is still capacious of Matthew Caffyn.

Constructing Historical Movements

The quotation of Chandler's summary above already indicates the organising distinction of his historical reconstruction: he proposes that there are discernible 'Radical' and 'Magisterial' strands to the Reformation heritage, both of which play into Baptist life. Much of his article is, in one way or another, a defence of this thesis, via a series of narrations of history that seek to demonstrate it, in the wider Reformation heritage, and then in General Baptist life.³ Of course, thus stated the thesis is unexceptional, but it becomes more interesting, and more difficult, when he defines one of the terms. The 'Radical' strand, on his telling, is not just capacious of, but exemplified by, Caffyn's unorthodox doctrine of the Trinity, and so he argues that an unwillingness to commit to Nicene and Chalcedonian orthodoxy is native and normal in a Baptist, or at least a General Baptist, tradition.

Chandler, that is, offers a reconstruction of the Radical Reformation, and particularly of the Anabaptist, and early Baptist movements, in which anti-Nicene theology is both normal and normative. This is a striking claim, fairly thoroughly revising current historiography of these movements if true. Unfortunately, Chandler's historical claims in the essay do not all withstand scrutiny, and, as a result, his broader reconstructive work is at least called into question. In this section, then, I will first indicate the problems in Chandler's historical work, and why they fail to support his reconstruction, and then

³ These sections fill pp. 142–150 of Chandler's article.

consider whether a better case for his position may nonetheless be made.

Chandler's first historical section (142–144)⁴ looks at the origins and development of the Reformation, arguing that there is a distinction to be made between the 'Magisterial' Reformers, who looked to return to Augustine, and the 'Radical' Reformers, who wanted to go back behind Augustine,⁵ to a time when the Christian movement had not accepted Nicene Trinitarianism.

Two features of this are worthy of note. The first is the construction of what Chandler calls 'primitivism'. This is nowhere defined in his paper, but seems to be identified with this invocation of a pre-Augustinian (or pre-Nicene) Christianity. Chandler lists 'primitivism' and a 'commitment to being scriptural' as two separate features of Baptist identity (141), so clearly 'primitivism' for him is not merely identified with biblicism. Chandler later suggests commonalities between Smyth's Christology and that of Valentinus (145) — this point is not elaborated upon, and I confess that I am at a loss to know what to make of it⁶ — but it presumably implies that by 'primitivism' Chandler means second-century theology, rather than the fourth/fifth-century Nicene/Augustinian theology championed by the magisterial reformers. This would of course establish the latitudinarian approach to Trinitarian and christological dogma for which Chandler is arguing; whether it is a plausible characteristic of the Radical Reformation, or indeed of the seventeenth-century General Baptist movement, is a more difficult question.

⁴ For ease of discussion, all references to Chandler's article will be given parenthetically in the text.

⁵ The point is stated in basically these terms on p. 144.

⁶ Perhaps Chandler assumes that Valentinus did write the *Gospel of Truth* (as, e.g., King has argued: K. L. King, *What is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 154), and that the positions attributed to him by Irenaeus in *Ad. Haer.* I.1–8 are all simply false (which I confess I cannot find any recent scholar arguing)? On these conditions, it would be merely implausible, rather than utterly ridiculous, to compare Valentinus with Smyth. That said, it surely does not need stating that Smyth did not dream of a perfect Aeon emitting a Pleroma of thirty lesser aeons, comprised of a tetras of two syzygies that expands to an Ogdad, etc., but this is what we know with confidence that Valentinus taught, and his Christology can only be made sense of within this context.

Obviously the ‘biblicism’ that Chandler identifies is a feature of both the Anabaptist and Baptist movements; Chandler offers no evidence, however, of either group appealing to pre-Nicene patristic movements as examples, and it is hard to think of scholarship that makes the idea plausible. Baptists and Anabaptists alike wished to return to the New Testament church, not to the church of the second century (or whenever).⁷

The second feature is the suggestion that the ‘Radical’ wing of the Reformation was not accepting of Nicene Trinitarianism. Various well-known anti-Trinitarians from the Reformation period are named — Servetus, of course — but the key argument is an attempt to link the Anabaptist strand of the Reformation to an openness to anti-Trinitarianism, through (1) a reading of the Schleithem Confession; (2) an invocation of Lelio Sozzini, described as an ‘Italian Anabaptist and unitarian theologian’ (p. 143); and (3) a reference to the 1550 Council of Venice.

Unfortunately, none of these three points are convincing. On the first, Chandler asserts that the Schleithem Confession ‘appears to identify the one God as the Father, not as the Trinity, and habitually distinguishes between “God” and “Christ”, and even refers to “God and Christ”,’ although he follows this with an acknowledgement that the Confession may not have been ‘consciously unorthodox’ (142). This is at best misleading: the Confession treats only the points at dispute between the Swiss Brethren and the Reformers, and so the fact that there is no article on the Trinity, or on the Person of Christ, is strong evidence that the Brethren were happily orthodox, and in simple

⁷ There is, to be sure, recent Baptist and Anabaptist writing that regards the church pre-Constantine as normative at some level (it is a fairly common move in defences of pacifism, e.g.; I myself have invoked it in discussing episcopacy, pointing to the ancient bishop as the eucharistic minister of a single gathered congregation); I cannot think of a single example of a Baptist or Anabaptist writer prior to (say) 1950 appealing to the subapostolic church as normative, however. There is also an older tradition of finding an alternative apostolic succession (the most obvious example is Landmarkianism, seeking an unbroken chain of baptised believers from the apostles to the present day). This of course includes an appeal to second-century churches (although often enough it is to the Montanists, not to the Catholics), but it equally appeals to later groups — the Donatists in Augustine’s day, various condemned medieval sects, and so forth — and in any case the appeal is not to normativity so much as to a claim of minimal faithfulness in the practice of believers’ baptism (by immersion).

agreement with the Reformed, on these doctrinal points. The Nicene Creed, of course, speaks of ‘one God, the Father almighty’, and so the language Chandler claims as evidence of an unorthodox Christology is in fact merely an echo of the most orthodox Trinitarian theology possible. As to the suggestion that the phrasing was unconsciously unorthodox, the main author of the Confession was Michael Sattler, who had been a Roman Catholic priest before his Anabaptist conversion, and had been formed by the Benedictine tradition of his monastery, St Peters of the Black Forest. It is almost inconceivable that he would have been ignorant of basic Trinitarian theology, or would have lapsed into unconsciously unorthodox expressions. On top of all the textual evidence above, I note that we have extensive writings from Sattler and several other prominent Swiss Brethren, and that there is no indication anywhere in that corpus of any disquiet with the doctrine of the Trinity. There is overwhelming historical evidence that the Swiss Brethren were orthodox on the doctrine of the Trinity, and Chandler’s (mis)readings of Schleithem offer no reason to question or doubt that evidence.

Chandler’s second claim is that the father of Unitarianism Lelio Sozzini was an Anabaptist; unfortunately, this is demonstrably just wrong. Lelio was (briefly) in contact with an Anabaptist group in Vicenza in 1546 (we know this because some years later one of that group denounced him to the Venetian Inquisition), but there is no evidence that he adopted their views on baptism, and fairly extensive evidence that he did not. The Inquisitorial condemnation asserts his anti-Trinitarianism, but does not associate him with denying infant baptism, implying that there was no suggestion that he did; further, his later close associations with (*inter alia*) Calvin, Bullinger, and Melancthon make it almost impossible to believe that he opposed paedobaptism. There is also positive evidence for his acceptance of paedobaptism: in a 1549 letter to Calvin he queried the validity of baptisms performed outside the Reformed churches, demonstrating that he was accepting of infant baptism, although concerned about the sanctity of the celebrant.⁸ Also, in his published 1555 Confession of

⁸ Lelio Sozzini, ‘Lelio Sozzini a Giovanni Calvino (Basilea, 25 luglio 1549)’, in Lelio Sozzini, *Opere: Studi e Testi per la Storia Religiosa del Cinquecento* 1, ed. by Antonio Rotondò (Firenze: Leo S.

Faith, he explicitly condemned 'all the errors of the Catabaptists'.⁹ Fausto Sozzini certainly denied infant baptism (indeed, pretty much denied baptism *in toto*), but it seems absolutely clear that his uncle did not, regardless of Chandler's assertion.

The 1550 'Council of Venice' was indeed a gathering of Anabaptists that took anti-Trinitarian positions; we do not know in any real detail who was there, just that about thirty congregations from northern Italy were represented. Italian Anabaptism was not in close contact with the more numerous and influential Swiss, German, and Dutch traditions, and was clearly pursuing its own, rather different course. As a result, casting Venice 1550 as somehow representative of the wider movement is deeply problematic; it was a rather local and limited event, which was unknown rather than repudiated in the wider tradition.

The obvious contrast here is with Münster: virtually every later Anabaptist knew of the errors of Jan Matthijs and Jan van Leyden, and vigorously repudiated them because they brought the movement into disrepute; there is no doubt that they would have been equally vigorous in repudiating the denial of Trinitarian orthodoxy at Venice for exactly the same reasons had they known about it. Again, Münster is central to every condemnation of the Anabaptists for a century and more after the events; it is impossible to imagine that controversialists who knew of the Venetian doctrines would not have employed them with similar vigour — but no-one did. It seems virtually certain, then, that the Venetian council disappeared immediately into obscurity amongst both the Anabaptists and their opponents. It cannot, therefore, be taken as definitive of the movement, as Chandler tries to do.

George Williams's classic account of the Radical Reformation proposed three strands: Rationalists; Spiritualists; and Evangelical Anabaptists.¹⁰ Historical work since has shown that Williams's

Olschki, 1986), pp. 153–157. For the relevant point, see particularly pp. 155–6 in the 'post scriptum'.

⁹ '[...] necnon etiam Catabaptistarum errores omnes fugio [...]' (Leilo Sozzini, 'Confessio Fidei' in *Opere*, ed. by Rotondò, pp. 95–100, p. 96).

¹⁰ George H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962), see pp. xxiv–xxv for a statement of this theme, which is then argued throughout the book.

(understandable and apologetic) desire to keep these strands completely separate was somewhat hopeful, but it is the Spiritualist strand, not the Rationalist one, that generally mixes with the Anabaptists. There is a small anti-Trinitarian fringe to the Reformation in the middle of the sixteenth century, exemplified by Servetus; its significance is rather amplified by contemporary hysteria, but even so, it had very little overlap with the Anabaptist movement.

The second historical section of Chandler's paper looks at the beginnings of the Baptist movement in Amsterdam in 1609, and focuses in on John Smyth's 'espousal of Hoffmanite (Anabaptist) Christology' (145), suggesting that Thomas Helwys strongly opposed him in this, 'finally breaking from him around 1610' (145). Chandler suggests that this debate represents in microcosm his 'Radical'/'Magisterial' split, and so locates that division at the beginnings of General Baptist life; he further suggests that there is a line to be drawn from Smyth to Caffyn, a line that establishes the presence of an anti-Trinitarian strand in General Baptist theology throughout the seventeenth century.

Unfortunately, again, the historical evidence does not support his reconstruction. There is some older scholarly debate, but since Jason Lee's 2003 monograph (or his 1999 doctoral thesis on which it was based) it has been fairly clear that Smyth never adopted a heavenly flesh Christology; rather, he moved to a place of regarding it as wrong, but not a barrier to communion.¹¹ Further, as is clear from Lee's reconstruction (indeed, simply from the dates of the key texts), the controversy is entirely wrapped up with Smyth's decision to join the Waterlander Mennonites, and Helwys's decision not to. It happens that the Waterlanders, taught by Menno, held to a heavenly flesh Christology, and so in joining them, Smyth had at least to concede that this was an acceptable position, even if wrong, which is what he did.

Standard accounts of this dispute, however, make nothing of Christology: Smyth and Helwys were Separatists, endlessly and profoundly concerned with questions of ecclesiology, and what renders a church, and a sacrament, valid; that is what led them both to finally

¹¹ Jason K. Lee, *The Theology of John Smyth: Puritan, Separatist, Baptist, Mennonite* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2003), chapter 7; see particularly the summary statement on p. 229: 'Smyth's acceptance of the heavenly flesh theory is questionable at best.'

repudiate infant baptism. They were thrown into a quandary by this repudiation, of course: if their own baptisms as infants were invalid, where could they receive a valid baptism from? Smyth resorted to se-baptism (and then baptised Helwys and the rest of the congregation) but when he met the Waterlanders he was convicted: if they were a true church of Christ, he should have sought baptism from them, rather than performing a somewhat bizarre rite on himself.

These are the well-attested reasons for Smyth’s joining the Waterlanders; Helwys refrained from following because, although they held a true doctrine of baptism, there were several other doctrines — certainly including Christology — on which he regarded them as in error. To join the Waterlanders, Smyth had to at least insist that their Christology was not unacceptable, which he duly did, although he never committed to it himself.

Given this history, Chandler’s attempts to suggest that Christology was the focus of the split between Smyth and Helwys seem doomed to failure: Smyth never in fact adopted the doctrine Chandler ascribes to him, but merely made space for it; his motives are all ecclesiological, and his minor Christological accommodation is explained entirely by his ecclesiological convictions. Chandler’s telling of this story is in danger of being misleading; as a result, his broader claim concerning seventeenth-century General Baptist theology appears very weak: if he had both Smyth at the start, and Caffyn at the end of the century as witnesses to an acceptance of heterodoxy, as he claims, something might be made of that. However, Smyth is boringly orthodox, and so Chandler is left with one data point, Caffyn — and even if he is right about Caffyn, one data point cannot establish a trend.

Chandler’s third historical vignette (147–150) concerns the early General Baptist confessional documents. He acknowledges that the flurry of doctrinal symbols offered by Smyth and Helwys around 1610 were all confessionally Trinitarian, but argues that, as we move to the middle of the seventeenth century, the published confessional documents were far less so. If one merely reads the texts published in William Lumpkin’s compendium of Baptist confessions, without any context, this point might appear reasonable; any serious consideration of the context, however, will defeat it.

The three texts Chandler appeals to are the 1651 ‘Faith and Practice of Thirty Congregations’; the 1654 ‘True Gospel Faith’; and the 1660 ‘Standard Confession’. On the 1651 text, he comments that the ‘triadic sections are, upon close inspection, rather vague’ (148). This is fair comment, but then the whole document is ‘rather vague’ doctrinally, emphasising much more ethical duties. Article 20, which contains the ‘triadic statements’, asserts in part, ‘God giveth gifts, and the Son doth the same, also the Holy Ghost, So they are one.’ The argument that unity of operation implies unity of essence is crucial to Nicene Trinitarianism (it is, for example, the whole argument of Gregory of Nyssa’s much-anthologised short text *ad Ablabius*, ‘That we should not think of saying there are three Gods’); I cannot prove that the framers of the ‘Faith and Practice [...]’ were aware of this — in fact I presume that they were not, given the doctrinal naivety of the text — but the fact that they instinctively reproduced a central Nicene argument in framing their doctrine is surely not insignificant.

Chandler comments on the 1654 text that ‘explicit trinitarianism appears to have all but disappeared from formal Baptist confession’. This assumes that the text is normative, of course, which it obviously is not,¹² but it also rather badly misrepresents the text, which is clearly a studied attempt to define doctrine using biblical language; as a result, there is indeed no stated doctrine of the Trinity, but the first article on the One God cites Biblical texts whose subject is Jesus, and so the document asserts, tacitly and unreflectively, the straightforward identification of Jesus with God — that it does so tacitly and unreflectively is compelling evidence that Trinitarian questions were not even on the radar of the authors, who implicitly assumed an orthodox Trinitarianism without imagining it could be questioned.

The comments on the 1660 Standard Confession are the most egregious. Chandler asserts that ‘[t]he one God [in the first article] is not the Trinity, but the Father, and Jesus is not mentioned until the confession’s third section. The Holy Spirit is not brought up until the seventh section’ (148), all of which is just to say that Articles I–VII of the Confession follow the shape of the Nicene Creed (no doubt

¹² Or why the need to write the Standard Confession just six years later?

deliberately; even a casual reader will spot the verbal similarities at key points). The Creed calls us to assert that ‘I believe in one God, the Father almighty [...] and in one Lord Jesus Christ who [...] and in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life, who [...]’. The Standard Confession follows exactly this pattern. I assume Chandler does not wish to try to argue that the Nicene Creed is anti-Nicene; if he does not, however, then his comments on the shape of the 1660 Standard Confession have no validity.

Further, it would appear that the framers of the confession were aware of such a possible criticism, and sought to head it off: Article VII, on the Holy Spirit, pauses after its first sentence to quote 1 John 5:7 (‘there are three that bear witness in heaven, the Father, the Word, the Holy Spirit, and these three are one’).¹³ It is hard to give any account of the reason for the inclusion of this text at this point other than an awareness on the part of the writers (who included Caffyn, or so I have argued¹⁴) that the credal shape might be heard as failing to teach the doctrine of the Trinity, and an urgent desire on their part to exclude that interpretation.

To summarise: Chandler tries to demonstrate his thesis by appeal to early Anabaptism, by close examination of the relationship between Smyth and Helwys, and by an examination of General Baptist symbolic documents; all three arguments fail when tested against well-documented historical facts; he has demonstrated no historical basis for his thesis.

Of course, he might be right, even if his presented arguments are weak. I have already suggested that Williams’s account of the Radical Reformation might offer him a way out, but then demonstrated that it unfortunately does not. I confess that I am at a loss to suggest other moves; it may be my blindness, but in the absence of more plausible suggestions, I assert that both the sixteenth-century Anabaptists, and the General Baptists, at least till 1660, recognised and understood the claims of classical Trinitarianism, and were comfortable with them. To

¹³ Modern Biblical criticism has of course demonstrated that this verse is inauthentic, but it was received as biblical by seventeenth-century General Baptists.

¹⁴ Stephen R. Holmes, ‘A note concerning the text, editions, and authorship of the 1660 Standard Confession of the General Baptists’, *Baptist Quarterly* 47 (2016): 2–7.

the extent that Chandler's reconstruction denies this, it can be assumed to be wrong.

Caffyn's doctrinal views

Chandler does not particularly offer an account of Caffyn's thought, relying essentially on Leon McBeth for the judgement that he was 'unitarian' (140–2). I do not in fact think it is fair to call Caffyn 'unitarian'. His doctrine of the Trinity is hard to reconstruct, needing to be pieced together from the accusations of his opponents and circumstantial details,¹⁵ but (as I shall argue) there is fairly strong evidence that he was opposed to Socinianism, and at least some evidence that his problems with classical Trinitarianism were more terminological than doctrinal. He was certainly heterodox, in the sense of being unwilling to subscribe to standard confessional formulae; he was also happy to associate with those (such as Daniel Allen) who were clearly Arian.¹⁶

That said, in 1692 Caffyn was an active member of a General Assembly that condemned Socinianism unreservedly and disciplined Richard Newton of Shrewsbury for teaching it,¹⁷ and, although he was repeatedly accused of believing 'that the Son of God was not of the uncreated nature of the Father, nor of the created nature of his mother' throughout the General Assemblies of the 1690s, he was every time acquitted, suggesting that he was able to convince those tasked with judging him that this was not a fair summary of his views, whatever they were.¹⁸

¹⁵ The best account at present is probably Clint C. Bass, *The Caffynite Controversy* (Oxford: Regent's Park College, 2020), pp. 99–104. I am not wholly convinced by Bass's account, however, and suspect that Caffyn was more able to claim orthodoxy than Bass proposes. Some of the reasons for this judgement are indicated below.

¹⁶ Allen expounds and defends his views in *The Moderate Trinitarian...* (London: Mary Fabian, 1699). He refuses the label 'Arian' (p. 10), although his doctrine would seem to fit it. He claims in passing not to know what 'Socinians' believe (p. v), although indicates his instincts would be irenic, whatever they believe.

¹⁷ W.T. Whitley, ed., *Minutes of the General Assembly of the General Baptist Churches in England*, 2 vols (London: Baptist Historical Society, 1909), I, 33, 37–8.

¹⁸ Some recent writers on Caffyn put this down to some sort of dissembling on his part (see, e.g., Curtis Freeman, *Contesting Catholicity: Theology for Other Baptists* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2014), p. 154, where he casts Caffyn as 'a master of theological obfuscation' and p. 157,

The distinction made in seventeenth-century England between Arianism and Socinianism might be relevant here: Socinians believed that Jesus was merely a man, not in any way pre-existent, and so that there was no ‘incarnation’; Arians believed in a Son, a spiritual, perhaps even divine, being who became incarnate, but who was not of one substance, or co-eternal, with the Father. It seems plausible from the evidence we have to suppose that Caffyn was not prepared to break fellowship over the homousion (he appears to have regarded it as a difficult doctrine to understand, I suspect because he understood ‘person’ and ‘substance’ in a broadly cartesian way, which does in fact make the doctrine impossible to hold without incoherence¹⁹), but was confessionally committed to some claim concerning the deity of the Son.

If all this is right, then Caffyn, far from being ‘unitarian’, was actively involved in repudiating that doctrine, and disciplining those who held it, at least in 1692.²⁰ Christopher Cooper’s contemporaneous account of the troubles in General Baptist life is directed at ‘Socinians’

n. 61, where Caffyn ‘was a skilled rhetorician who cleverly eluded his accusers [...] and [...] escaped conviction by managing [...] to avoid plain language about what he did not believe’). This seems to me to be an extraordinarily difficult proposal given that everything else we know of Caffyn’s career and character suggests that he was a ready, even eager, controversialist. Alex Carver’s alternative suggestion, that Caffyn survived because he had a loyal block of supporters who were willing to give him the benefit of the doubt almost regardless of the evidence, is more interesting, and I shall return to it later. (Alex Carver, ‘Matthew Caffyn Revisited: Cooperation, Christology, and Controversy in the Life of an Influential Seventeenth-Century Baptist’, *Baptist Quarterly* 47 (2016): 44–64.)

¹⁹ As John Biddle, the father of English anti-Trinitarianism, pointed out succinctly: ‘[b]y Person I understand, as Philosophers do, *suppositum intelligens*, that is an intellectual substance compleat [...]’ (John Biddle, *XII Arguments Drawn out of Holy Scripture...* (London: [n. pub], 1647), pp. 2–3, marginal note). If a ‘person’ is simply an ‘intellectual substance’, then the number of persons must be identical to the number of substances in any non-material reality, and so ‘three persons, one substance’ is obvious nonsense.

²⁰ I suspect, on the basis of his footnote 18, that Chandler wants to use the term ‘unitarian’ capaciously to include all who deny the Nicene doctrine of the Trinity, in which case Caffyn probably is included. The distinction between Socinian and Arian views is real and important, however — as I have suggested, the evidence indicates that it was a vital distinction for Caffyn. Further, in the late seventeenth century the word ‘unitarian’ referred to the Socinian view specifically (so *OED*, *s.v.* ‘Unitarian’; see the example from Nye). In what follows, I shall use ‘unitarian’ in this specific sense, and ‘anti-Trinitarian’ to refer capaciously to all non-Nicene views. (Allen, to be fair, is prepared to accept the label ‘unitarian’ for his (Arian) views, *Moderate Trinitarian*, p. 10, but this usage is eccentric in the time.)

and ‘Cafenists’ (*sic*);²¹ suggesting that he was aware of different positions, although as he warms to his theme, his accusations become less specific, if more entertaining; eventually Caffyn’s doctrine is described as ‘nothing but a Fardle of Mahometanism, Arianism, Socinianism, and Quakerism’!²²

That said, Caffyn was clearly unhappy with classical Trinitarianism, at least in its standard formulations,²³ and the fact that this did not exclude him from a national role in the General Baptist Assemblies of the 1690s is remarkable, and carries implications for narrating Baptist identity, as Chandler sees. The distinctions I have just been making, however, show that Chandler’s claim that ‘General Baptist fundamentals did not include a belief in orthodox Christology or the doctrine of the ‘Trinity’ (150) is at least misleading: the General Assemblies of the 1690s disciplined a Socinian, and condemned the formula that ‘the Son of God was not of the uncreated nature of his Father’, which certainly seems like a straightforward repudiation of a denial of the Nicene homoousion.²⁴

The controversy they fell into — and it was a serious one, leading to several years of national schism — did not concern any acceptance of Trinitarian deviation, but whether Caffyn’s views should have been considered to be implicated in their repudiation of error. If my reconstruction of Caffyn’s hesitations above is correct, the General Assembly in effect, and not without strong criticism, judged that Caffyn’s protestations that he did not really understand the traditional formulae were genuine, and further judged that, nonetheless, his views

²¹ Christopher Cooper, *The Vail Turn’d Aside...* (London: printed for the author and sold by J. Marshal, 1701), pp. 14–15.

²² Cooper, *Vail Turn’d*, p. 110; this comes at the end of a classic genealogy of heresy, beginning with Simon Magus, and culminating in Caffyn, who is cast as heir to every error ever made in Christian history.

²³ I have argued before that there is a remarkably stable doctrine of the Trinity for most of Christian history. See my *The Holy Trinity: Understanding God’s Life* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2012).

²⁴ In 1698 — in the middle of the schism, and at the height of the controversy, the General Assembly also unanimously condemned the proposition that ‘the ffather Distinct or Seperate from the Word and the Holy Ghost is the Most High God’ (Whitley, *Minutes*, I.53).

were conformable to the traditional formulae.²⁵ He was accepted because he was judged to be a good Trinitarian, albeit one who chose to express the doctrine in novel ways.²⁶ Contra Chandler, General Baptist fundamentals in the 1690s demonstrably include ‘orthodox Christology’ and ‘the doctrine of the Trinity’, but offer, albeit controversially within the movement, some latitude in how this is expressed.

Liberty of Conscience

Chandler briefly notes the long-standing Baptist commitment to liberty of conscience, but unfortunately again rather misrepresents it, citing Stefan Zweig to the effect that a commitment to liberty of conscience (specifically, the right to interpret the Scriptures personally) is incompatible with an account of heresy (150). This is not, of course, the shape of early General Baptist thought, which combined an insistence that no-one should be compelled to believe or practise anything by the state, with an (often astonishingly) narrow account of the limits of church fellowship.

The classic example is Helwys’s *Mistery of Iniquity*,²⁷ which is essentially an argument that his little fellowship of a dozen or so believers are the only true Christians in the world, and that everyone else is destined for eternal damnation; at the same time, in treating of the kingship of Christ, he writes the endlessly quoted lines,

[...] our lord the king hath no more power over their consciences then over ours, and this is none at all: for our lord the king is but an earthly king, and

²⁵ There is some evidence that this was Caffyn’s line of defence on at least one occasion. In a dispute in Chatham, Kent, in 1701, Caffyn was charged that he had repeatedly asserted ‘[t]hat Christ was not in any Sense the most High God’. Cooper (who is transparently partisan against Caffyn, it must be noted) states that he did not deny saying this, but tried to explain that it was a claim compatible with orthodoxy (Cooper, *Vail Turn’d*, p. 132).

²⁶ In the events around Exeter that led to the famous 1719 Salters’ Hall Synod, John Cox offered precisely this defence of his own position. He says of his congregants ‘I told them that I was no *Arian*; and then mention’d what I believed concerning the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, in the words of the sacred scripture, which I thought were most proper to express the true sense of a doctrine that entirely depended on a divine revelation, especially since this doctrine was own’d to be ineffable and incomprehensible.’ (James Peirce, *The Western Inquisition...* (London: John Clark, 1720), p. 181.)

²⁷ Thomas Helwys, *Short Declaration of the Mistery of Iniquity* (1612) [original publication, n.p., n.pub.].

he hath no authority as a king but in earthy causes [...] mens religion to God is betwixt God and themselves; the king shall not answere for it, neither may the king be judg betwene God and man. Let them be heretikes, Turcks, Jewes, or what soever it apperteynes not to the earthly power to punish them in the least measure [...].²⁸

A properly Baptist commitment to liberty of conscience, that is, is not a claim that people should not be judged for their beliefs, but an insistence that the only competent judge is Christ, who commands, in his sovereign power, all people everywhere to repent and to live according to his laws. There is much doctrinal innovation, formulation, and discussion in seventeenth-century General Baptist life, but it is emphatically not directed towards establishing a broad doctrinal latitude; rather, it intends a discovery of truth which will then be insisted on as a condition of fellowship.

Baptist Identity

As I indicated, at the beginning of this essay, I share Chandler's desire to find a way of narrating Baptist identity that is able to include Caffyn's story. I have given reasons above for not finding Chandler's own version convincing; what might be offered in its place?

The answer, I suspect, depends on how we reconstruct the reasons for Caffyn's repeated exonerations by the General Assembly in 1690s. I have already suggested that we have to put to one side the idea that it was down to him dissembling; that was simply not in his character. I have proposed two further suggestions in passing: that he was in fact able to convince the Assembly that his views were orthodox, if expressed in novel terms; and Alex Carver's proposal that he had a loyal block of support. To these we may add a third, proposed by Clint C. Bass in his recent book on Caffyn, that the various forms of trial Caffyn was set were, by accident or (more probably) design, stacked to make it easy for him to acquit himself.²⁹

None of these ideas are *prima facie* implausible; more significantly, nor are they exclusive. By the 1690s, Caffyn was an elder

²⁸ Helwys, *Mistery*, p. 69.

²⁹ Bass, *The Caffynite Controversy*, see, e.g., pp. 55–6.

statesman of the denomination; he had planted many churches, contended for the faith in public against Quakers and others, and several times served prison sentences for his faithful service; it is not hard to see why there should be a degree of loyalty to him. This might easily manifest itself in a willingness to arrange tests to give him the best chance possible, and in his being allowed the benefit of the doubt where a decision was disputable.

It would be possible to read this cynically: an example of an ‘old boys’ club’ protecting its own, and perhaps this was not wholly absent. That said, Paul was not afraid to claim that the churches he had planted owed him a certain loyalty, even in dispute (2 Cor 10, e.g.), and the respect due to the martyr who had stood firm under persecution and suffered is a common theme in the Christian tradition. This would point us towards accounts of Baptist identity in which a history of faithful service, of successful evangelism, and perhaps particularly of suffering for the faith, was relevant to determining someone’s commitment or otherwise to that faith, even if some of what they had said was troubling — an account of Baptist identity where orthopraxy matters alongside orthodoxy.

What of Caffyn’s unwillingness to subscribe to the standard formulae? I have already mentioned in passing the 1719 Salters’ Hall Synod, where most of the General Baptists (and most of the Presbyterians) argued that subscription to non-biblical Trinitarian formulae should not be required of pastors;³⁰ this was also the decision taken by the General Assembly in 1697.³¹ Caffyn had served several prison sentences under the Clarendon Code, essentially for his unwillingness to subscribe to the 39 Articles, and so perhaps had more reason than most to be unhappy about enforced subscription to extra-biblical standards.

³⁰ Of course, the standard telling of later history suggests, not without reason, that this was not a happy position to take (in that most of the churches of non-subscribing pastors did in fact become unitarian in the decades following the synod). The formulae on the table were Article 1 of the 39 Articles of the Church of England, and questions 5 and 6 of the Shorter Westminster Catechism.

³¹ Whitley, ed., *Minutes*, I.51.

For reasons not unrelated to the Clarendon Code, British Baptist life has developed a certain reserve concerning doctrinal statements, whilst maintaining a surprisingly energetic commitment to a broadly defined doctrinal orthodoxy. The Baptist Union of Great Britain, the Baptist Union of Wales, and the Baptist Union of Scotland, all have remarkably brief Declarations of Principle, each of which essentially insist on congregational governance, believers' baptism by immersion, and the missionary imperative, and little else. These three denominations, however, have remained more committed to orthodoxy than almost any other historic denominations in the United Kingdom. If this uneasiness with enforced formulae of subscription is also a part of an account of Baptist identity that is capacious of Matthew Caffyn, then the continuing commitment to a broad doctrinal orthodoxy must also be recognised. I make no judgement in this essay as to whether Caffyn merely stumbled over proposed formulae, or whether he genuinely denied the doctrine of the Trinity; it seems clear from the historical data that the strand of the General Baptist tradition which was willing to welcome him judged that the former was the case, and so conceded nothing of orthodoxy except its insistence on certain extra-biblical formulae.